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Setting Sail on the Ship of State Landscape Architecture in the National Park Service

The National Park Service, it is often observed, employs more landscape architects than any other single organization. This has been the case since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal created what Albert D. Taylor described at the time as "unlimited opportunity for landscape architects."¹

But if the marriage of landscape architecture and the Park Service was consummated in the spring of 1933, it was preceded by long acquaintance. Scenic preservationists had urged the creation of a Park Service within the Department of the Interior since at least 1905, when Gifford Pinchot established his Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture. That year Congress transferred the national forest reserves from Interior to Pinchot's forest bureau, and Pinchot pressed for the transfer of the national parks as well. Since this change would have led to increased grazing, logging, and dam construction in the parks, it was opposed by a broad coalition of park advocates, including automobile clubs, mountaineering groups, and landscape architects.

If this heterogeneous group hoped to respond effectively to what has been called the "Gospel of Efficiency," they needed to offer a suitably Progressive alternative to scientific forestry

and reclamation engineering as models for park management. And so they argued that increased domestic tourism, catalyzed by a growing interest in national scenic treasures, would generate economic activity, prevent Americans from spending their money abroad, and inspire patriotic sentiments among an increasingly diverse population. But scenery as an "asset" would accrue value and yield returns only if left "unimpaired." Extractive industries—even if regulated—promised to destroy the features tourists came to see. To preserve parks then, according to Secretary of the Interior Richard A. Ballinger in 1910, "comprehensive plans" would need to be drawn up so that the parks could be "opened up for the convenience and comfort of tourists and campers and for the careful preservation of natural features."²

It followed that Ballinger's successor, Franklin K. Lane, appointed a San Francisco landscape architect, Mark Daniels, "general superintendent and landscape gardener" of national parks. In 1914, Daniels spelled out how landscape architectural theory could guide the management of the federal scenic reservations: "Land is not always land, but is sometimes coal, sometimes timber," he observed, "it is also sometimes scenery, and as such merits the careful study and development that would be extended to other national resources."³ Stephen T. Mather, who was appointed an assistant to Secretary Lane early the next year, later stated that "all of the improvements in the parks must be carefully harmonized with the landscape, and to this end, engineers trained in landscape architecture or fully appreciative of the necessity for maintaining the parks in their natural state must be employed."⁴

These sentiments were inscribed in the heart of the 1916 legislation that created the National Park Service, which charged the new bureau "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for future generations."⁵ From the earliest days of the Park Service, Mather consulted landscape architects as experts who could provide not only design

Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park, Montana.



services, but technical validation as well, analogous (in a more artistic vein) to the scientific expertise provided by Pinchot's foresters. As the number of people visiting national parks rose dramatically, Park Service landscape architects developed a practice tailored to the task of modernizing the national park system. In the early 1920s, chief landscape architect Daniel R. Hull applied contemporary principles of town planning in the design of "park villages" that concentrated visitor services and accommodations in picturesque groups of buildings. The park villages in Yosemite Valley and on the south rim of the Grand Canyon are examples. By the mid-1920s, Hull's successor, Thomas C. Vint, faced new threats to the scenic integrity of the parks. By that time, Congress had responded to the growing popularity of national parks among middle class motorists by making huge appropriations for the construction of modern park roads. Under Vint's guidance, the Park Service landscape division exerted a modifying influence on road building, often battling park concessioners and other interests to do so. Beginning with Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park, Vint's landscape architects collaborated with engineers from the Bureau of Public Roads to produce park roads that made carefully selected scenic areas accessible, without significantly impairing the scenic vistas motorists had come to see.

By the mid-1920s, numerous controversies and debates had emerged over conflicting visions of what constituted appropriate "park development." Park concessioners, whom Mather had cajoled into putting up the capital for many park improvements, needed to expand in order to pay dividends; mountaineers and preservationists decried what they saw as grotesque overcrowding in certain areas (especially Yosemite Valley) and warned that further development would destroy, not preserve, park landscapes; park superintendents, responsible for public safety and health, demanded better roads and facilities. By the end of the decade, Thomas Vint had formalized the expression of these conflicting interests into a planning process, culminating in a graphic and textual document that he and Horace Albright called a "master plan." As Vint pithily described it, the master plan was "the counterpart of the city plan; everyone wants to get in the act, [and] the procedure calls for how they get in and out."⁶

The term "master plan" was widely used among planners, especially after the Department of Commerce used the expression in the standard city planning act published in 1927. The master plan was intended to be the objective and comprehensive record of preset goals for the development of a community. But in practice the master plan,

which was intended to guide municipal zoning decisions, often simply recorded them. Zoning without planning was widespread during the 1920s; the national parks, however, offered the opportunity to exercise idealized landscape planning procedures. The national park master plan epitomized the planning goals of contemporary landscape architects and planners in ways that contemporary city and regional plans could not. Regional land use, for example, could be determined completely in a national park, according to the suitability of different areas for different uses. The construction of villages (developed areas) could be guided by authoritative town plans and detailed architectural guidelines. Above all, highway planning could be integrated into the overall goals of the master plan rather than pursued separately by engineers planning independent highway systems. Vint's master plans successfully curbed road construction in national parks and assured that the roads that were built met high construction standards devised to reduce their visual and environmental impact. The development of national parks in the early-20th century exemplified the regional planning ideals of a certain group of American planners, very much as the municipal landscape park had expressed the civic vision of a previous generation.

Under Director Horace Albright, the master planning process was made official policy at the Park Service by the end of the decade. When the New Dealers arrived in Washington in 1933, Vint's landscape architectural division had produced detailed master plans for almost every national park and monument under Park Service jurisdiction. The plans included six-year development outlines that prioritized future construction. Drawn over topographic maps of the parks, the master plans depicted all the development deemed appropriate for the park, and so became powerful tools for limiting development. The plans zoned parks into land-use categories, from corridors of discrete "developed areas" that followed park roads, to vast tracts of back country, described as "wilderness," which was to remain forever roadless. Circulation systems (trails, fire roads, and park roads) each were drawn on separate sheets, which together described an interlaced pattern of different ways of moving through the park—a planning procedure that revealed Vint's considerable debts to Olmstedian theory and practice. Other sheets, drawn at more detailed scales, provided site plans of individual entrances, villages, and other developed areas. Together, the plans and outlines of the master plan described an ideal process of regional planning.

That spring, as Congress hastily enacted emergency spending legislation, the schematic and

partially developed designs contained in the master plans were immediately converted into construction drawings, initiating a decade of unprecedented national park development. The Park Service was also put in charge of planning and design for all state (and many county) parks built with New Deal funds. National park master planning procedures subsequently were used to plan park systems in 47 states, and in the design of over 560 state and local recreation areas.⁷ With labor provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps and capital projects funded by the Public Works Administration and other agencies, Park Service landscape architecture enjoyed its heyday.

The Park Service was not alone in expanding its landscape architectural design and construction activities. In 1934, Albert Taylor estimated that 90% of the membership of the American Society of Landscape Architects (all of whom had been unemployed the year before) now worked for the federal government in some capacity.⁸ In a matter of months, the New Deal took American landscape architecture from near dormancy into the most active period in its history. But the New Deal also inevitably altered the profession. Landscape architects who had been estate designers took positions as “technical advisors” to the CCC, as junior landscape architects planning state park and other developments, as foremen supervising work in the field, and as executives in Washington. More and more private offices were closing as professionals took permanent positions within government bureaucracies. Taylor, himself a former estate designer based in Cleveland, was among a number of professionals expressing ambivalence about the “condition of socialism” into which the profession was drifting. “Social currents,” he observed ominously, were “carrying us through an uncharted sea under most abnormal conditions.”⁹ Taylor’s sentiments were seconded by Henry V. Hubbard, the ASLA president and Harvard professor; years of hardship, however, tempered their misgivings. “If we now identify ourselves with those things that are going to be important in the future,” Hubbard predicted, “we shall grow with them and find ample opportunity for service....Since, therefore, our ship is about to sail, it behooves us to get aboard.”¹⁰

The histories of the Park Service and of American landscape architecture converged in the spring of 1933 as this perilous voyage began, and for a brief period the two institutions transformed one another. Expanding on the solid methodology Thomas Vint had instituted, the Park Service became a landscape architecture factory, producing hundreds of national and state park plans and providing technical supervision for CCC camps all over the country. In 1936, Congress authorized the

Park Service to undertake a “national park and parkway plan,” the country’s first and only true attempt to produce a national, comprehensive plan for recreational land use. By the end of the 1930s, the Park Service had been evolved from a small, tightly focused Western park commission, into a national (and fully regionalized) recreational planning bureau, cooperating with every state government, and with hundreds of park development projects under construction and hundreds more being planned. For its part, the profession of landscape architecture, which had been best known in the 1920s for the design of “country places” for the elite, had been almost totally mobilized to provide services for New Deal recreational planning initiatives.

When a sustained private market for landscape architectural services did reemerge after World War II, it did so under a new set of circumstances. Corporations and other organizations, anxious to relocate out of cities, became the new “country place” clients in postwar America. These important clients embraced of International Style architecture in the design of new headquarters and suburban campuses, and professional landscape designers and educators adapted to the trend. These developments were bound to alter the relationship between the profession of landscape architecture and the work of Park Service planning; Modernist landscape architecture produced its own masterpieces over the next decades, but its usefulness in national park design and management would never be significant. Other changes reflected the political climate of the postwar period. Concepts like national recreational planning suddenly seemed radical, and if the Park Service continued to employ large numbers of landscape architects, the bureau’s program of comprehensive recreational planning ended by the 1960s.

Since then, the history of national parks and of landscape architecture seem to have diverged. The preservation and development of national parks in the early-20th century expressed ideal civic arrangements, centered around a public experience of landscape beauty. Visitors were vital to the success of landscape preservation; without people there were no parks, only wild regions of the public domain, easily subject to other forms of exploitation. By the 1960s, however, under the pressures of brutal overcrowding in some national parks, a wider range of park managers and planners came to identify the public as the enemy of preservation. Parks no longer needed to be “opened up for the convenience and comfort of tourists,” therefore, as much as protected from the environmental impacts of their attentions. The idea of national parks as public places and ideal

civic expressions shifted to a scientific model of parks as assemblages of environmental systems and ecological communities. Humans had no legitimate place in such a model, since they could only further degrade the environmental purity that presumably preceded their appearance. Park Service landscape architects, many of whom were leading this shift, therefore rejected Olmstedian theory and turned to environmental sciences to replace landscape aesthetics in new planning and design processes.

My own work as a Park Service landscape architect represents another strand of the bureau's institutional history, one which has perhaps taken an unpredicted turn. In 1935, Congress directed the Park Service to conduct a Historic Sites Survey in order to compile a national inventory of buildings and sites of national historical significance. This duty eventually developed into the Park Service's National Historic Landmarks program, which since 1935 has designated over 2,000 such Landmarks. In the 1980s, a renewed interest in

the preservation of Park Service rustic architecture led to the designation of a number of park buildings as National Historic Landmarks.¹¹ In 1993, I was asked to research the history of Park Service landscape architecture with the goal of designating a series of National Historic Landmarks that would identify the best examples of Park Service landscape planning and design, as the completed architectural survey had for individual buildings.

It was soon clear that, considering the scope and significance of the "park development" undertaken by the Park Service since 1917, the identification of appropriate Landmark Districts would be problematic. Most of the national park system as we know it (and a number of the nation's finest state park systems as well) were planned and developed by the Park Service between the World Wars. The national park system certainly had been initiated in the 19th century, and there have been many significant postwar additions as well; but to a great degree the image and the facilities of the most popular components of the national park

system are constructions of the 1920s and '30s. Above all, they are (like the National Historic Landmarks program itself) products of the New Deal. Scenic roads engineered for automobiles and lined with crenelated guard walls; "rustic" architecture and construction details; campgrounds, picnic areas, and administrative villages; the visual character of many of the developed portions of national parks embody the planning and design goals that Daniel Hull, Thomas Vint, and their colleagues provided.

Much of the national park system, in other words, does not just contain certain historic resources (such as buildings); it is itself historic. Its planning and development represent the goals and aspirations of certain portions of early-20th-century American society just as surely as many municipal park systems embody related civic visions of the 19th century. This awareness of the cultural and historical significance of large "natural" parks (in addition to their obvious biological significance) indicates that conceptual models of national parks continue to evolve, as they always have. The preservation of the national park system as unique cultural infrastructure, for example, is beginning to be considered alongside the mandate to preserve (as best we can) undisturbed ecological communities and environmental systems.

The designation of National Historic Landmark districts that encompass monuments of Park Service landscape architecture requires that the Park Service recognize the significance of its own historical planning activities. The circle is completed when we consider that many Park Service landscape architects are now actively involved in the preservation of Park Service landscape architecture. This all may seem self-serving, but landscape architects employed with historic municipal park systems have been in similar situations for decades. Even historic preservationists have come to realize that the history of historic preservation has its own monuments, and that restorations often tell us far more about the restorer than the restored. Scenic preservation, too, has its history and monuments, and designating Landmarks of scenic preservation involves an analogous and similarly introspective recognition that scenery and wilderness are cultural constructions, not absolute values.

The National Historic Landmark districts of Park Service landscape architecture to be designated this year will necessarily include large areas of "natural" significance within their boundaries. Five state parks, for example, will be nominated in their entirety as outstanding examples of landscape architectural planning. The Park Service has been more reluctant to see its larger (more "natural") parks designated as Landmarks in this com-

Stone steps at Lake Guernsey State Park, Wyoming.



prehensive manner. At Mount Rainier National Park, for example, a comprehensive district has been drawn that includes virtually every “developed area” in the park, but which excludes the park’s “wilderness areas,” despite the fact that those areas first received such protective designation through the historic park development process of Thomas Vint’s master plans. There is an understandable reluctance to compromise the clarity of the current distinction between “natural” and “cultural” resources, but describing different portions of parks as either cultural landscapes or natural landscapes obscures the fact that national parks have succeeded by infusing primeval places with cultural value. The preservation of areas designated as parks has been achieved primarily by encouraging the perception of places as scenery—as landscapes—which deserve protection. Segregating districts of cultural significance within larger park landscapes represents only an interim step in an evolving sense of the cultural constructions of wilderness and scenery in the context of American national parks.

The most important result of the designation of these Landmark districts is their potential for affecting park interpretation and planning in the future. Landscape architecture and the National Park Service have indeed grown more distant in the last three decades. Park development and landscape preservation today are often characterized as mortally antagonistic, not mutually enabling. The symbiosis that took both the Park Service and landscape architecture to their highest points in the 1930s has been reduced to a historical interest. But today both state parks and national parks face unprecedented threats. Many state governments see their state parks as underdeveloped resorts. Strapped for cash, legislators look to new conference centers, ski resorts, and golf courses not only to cover the cost of park administration, but to turn a profit. National parks potentially face an almost opposite, but related fate. As existing facilities become more and more crowded, the parks will cease to be public in any meaningful sense, since only those who make reservations far in advance will have access. And federal budget cutters and environmentalists alike have recently agreed that raising park entrance fees would serve both their interests, in one case by exploiting the profit-making potential of parks and in the other by further restricting public access.

National Historic Landmarks of Park Service landscape architecture can perhaps serve to remind both parties of the significance of what was achieved in the 1920s and '30s: the creation of a middle ground between excesses of commercialism and of exclusivity. In an era of increasingly

strident extremes, the historical partnership of landscape architecture and the National Park Service may yet serve as a viable precedent for preserving scenic landscapes by planning for limited recreational uses of public lands.

- 1 Albert D. Taylor, “Notes on Federal Activity Relating to Landscape Architecture,” *Landscape Architecture* 25, no. 1 (October 1934): 41.
- 2 Department of the Interior, *Reports of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1910* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1911), 57-58.
- 3 Daniels was paraphrasing an earlier comment by Secretary Lane in the first portion of this observation. Department of the Interior, *1915 Annual Reports*, 843, 849.
- 4 Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *Report of the Director of the National Park Service to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1918* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918), 10.
- 5 Hillory A. Tolson, *Laws Relating to the National Park Service and the National Parks and Monuments* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 9-10.
- 6 Herbert Evison, *Interview with Thomas Vint*, 1960, p. 10. Transcript in Thomas C. Vint Collection, Papers of Charles E. Peterson. Horace Albright was responsible for the official use of the term “master plan.”
- 7 Department of the Interior, National Park Service, *The CCC and Its Contribution to a Nation-Wide State Park Recreational Program* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office), 15-16.
- 8 Taylor was the managing editor of *Landscape Architecture* magazine at the time. Albert D. Taylor, “Notes on Federal Activity Relating to Landscape Architecture,” *Landscape Architecture* 25, no. 1 (October 1934): 41.
- 9 Albert D. Taylor, “Public Works and the Profession of Landscape Architecture,” *Landscape Architecture* 24, no. 3 (April 1934), 135-141.
- 10 Henry V. Hubbard, “ASLA Notes,” *Landscape Architecture* 23, no. 3 (April 1933): 201-202.
- 11 Laura Soulliere Harrison, *Architecture in the Parks: A National Historic Landmark Theme Study* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986).

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Photos by the author.